

Environmental Insecurity and Conflict Resolution in Mozambique



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Lois Sweet

[Photo: Elephant fence in Mozambique.]

Along the eastern shore of southern Africa lies Mozambique, a country of unparalleled beauty. Before civil war erupted in 1975, its spectacular, pristine beaches were a popular playground for Europeans and South Africans. But by the time the peace accord was signed in 1992, landmines were scattered throughout the countryside and most of its infrastructure had been destroyed.

Today, the Mozambicans are struggling to rebuild their country. One of the things that might contribute to their economic progress is ecotourism. But this industry could also threaten the survival and livelihood of indigenous communities, unless those most immediately affected are involved in its development and implementation.

Ecotourism

To participate in ecotourism ventures, Mozambicans require the knowledge and ability to negotiate on an equal footing with developers, an awareness of land rights and natural resources, and strong local institutions. Meeting these needs present enormous challenges for people mired in poverty, devastated by years of fighting, and with illiteracy rates of about 60%.

Moreover, "people have no experience of tourism," says Mateus Muthemba, a project officer with [Helvetas](#), a Swiss non-governmental organization. "They think of tourism as something for white people, and they're worried about it because they have no cultural experience of ... making it good for them. Because of their close links with South Africa, they know that people lost their lands to tourism and weren't always compensated."

Five-year initiative

Mathemba works for Helvetas on the *Environmental Insecurity and Conflict Resolution* project. This five year initiative, supported in its initial stages by the International Development Research Centre's [Peacebuilding and Reconstruction](#) program initiative, targets local communities in the Matutuine District, which lies between Maputo Bay, the South African border, the Indian Ocean, and the Maputo River. Approximately 3,500 families, or 15,000 people, live in this area.

After peace was achieved, and without the knowledge or participation of people in the region, the Government of Mozambique granted exclusive rights to an American investor to develop 235,000 hectares of their land for tourism. The investor did not divulge his plans to local communities. Naturally, community members got worried.

Electric fence

But worry turned to fear as they watched the Elephant Coast Company erect 24 kilometres of an electric fence. The fence represents the start of an enclosure for an elephant reserve, apparently at the heart of this development project. Now, with the fence disrupting migratory routes, elephants routinely destroy people's houses and eat their crops.

In the absence of information to the contrary, community members are concerned that this development may bring in other large animals such as lions, leopards, rhinos, and water buffalo. Local people have no tradition of living with them, and they don't want to be forced to learn how. "Development can bring conflict, and we have to know how to deal with this conflict," says Mathemba. "Our vision is to empower the community so that they can be involved in decision-making processes."

Community meetings

Toward that end, he and his colleagues are meeting with communities to explain the peace-building project and discuss development issues. Through a highly consultative process, the project team is informing residents of the nature and scope of proposed developments, and of their rights to land and natural resources within the context of Mozambique's new Land Law, which was introduced last year. Team members are also helping interested communities to delineate and register their territory according to the legal provisions.

Since the project began in 1998, coloured maps of the Matutuine District have been drawn to show where land use interests conflict. (Symbolically, red areas represents high levels of land conflict, yellow areas indicate medium levels of conflict, white indicates no conflict, and green indicates reserve lands.) These maps also depict the variety of ways each community uses land — for sacred, communal, and agricultural purposes — and where these activities take place.

Commercial ventures

In addition, the project team is working with each community to help identify and develop a range of commercial ventures, based on natural resources, that will be environmentally sustainable and provide maximum value to the entire community. At community meetings, project workers introduce the topic of ecotourism for discussion. They describe it as a relationship, a way of integrating local culture with natural resources in a sustainable manner — in other words, of developing an area using conservation as the guiding principle. When presented in those terms, people have no difficulty embracing the concept.

"I would like such tourism because life is hard for me and my family," says Satanca Jorge Noante, a farmer. "I have eight people to feed and I would like a job. For my family, they would like not to be so isolated. If ecotourism can give jobs and improve our roads and provide hospitals, then that would be a good thing."

Long-term process

Muthemba believes such benefits are attainable, but only through community participation in the decision-making process. And that, he admits, is a long-term process.

"But we are making experience," he concludes. "We are the first [in Mozambique] to tackle such an important issue and it is a big challenge. We hope to set an example of what's possible."

Lois Sweet is the Chief Writer (English) for Public Affairs at IDRC. (Photo: L. Sweet)

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Resource Persons:

Luis Diniz, Team Leader, Helvetas Mocambique, Av. Ahmed Sekou Toure 637, Maputo, Mozambique; E-mail: helmoz@zebra.uem.mz

Wardie Leppan, Senior Program Specialist, Regional Office for Southern Africa, International Development Research Centre, PO Box 477, Wits, 2050, South Africa;
Tel: (27-11) 403-3952; Fax: (27-11) 403-1417; E-mail: WLeppan@idrc.org.za

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[Alternative Approaches to Managing Conflict Over Natural Resources](#), by John Eberlee

[Creating Ecologically-Based Businesses for the Maya Biosphere Reserve](#), by Kevin Conway